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SUBJECT: Uruguay Elections - Majority of Cabinet Likely to Seek  
Elected Posts

SUMMARY

¶1. As the election season moves into higher gear, President Vazquez informed the members of his cabinet that any individuals who wish to campaign in October's general election will need to resign their positions after the June 28 primaries. It seems likely that the majority of the cabinet will do so. Replacements are likely to be selected in accordance with their ability to complete outstanding initiatives in what is widely seen to have been a successful presidency. End Summary.

¶2. President Vazquez announced during a cabinet meeting April 20 that any ministers wishing to pursue elected office in October's general election would need to tender their resignation from the cabinet after Uruguay's national primary (internal party elections to determine presidential candidates) on 28 June. The move is not unprecedented; a similar request was made by President Luis Alberto Lacalle (1990-95) to his Cabinet members. Mindful of the considerable strain that campaigning places on ministers' schedules, President Vazquez is hoping to ensure that the cabinet's ability to function is not too badly impacted by the election season. The move could also be viewed as a way of moving controversial members of the cabinet out of the public limelight, to better the governing coalition's chances in the fall elections.

¶3. The ruling Frente Amplio coalition (Broad Front, or FA) party's substantial victory in 2005 with over 50 percent of the total vote meant that Vazquez's administration was the first since the return of democracy in 1985 in which the cabinet has not included opposition party ministers. As its name states, however, the FA is a broad coalition, and that means each cabinet minister has a key role to fulfill within his/her own party in addition to cabinet responsibilities. Each of those parties will be trying to maximize their political positions in the coming months, placing significant demands on their top politicians. Once the internal elections have revealed not only the FA's presidential candidate but also the wider political lay of the land, the pace of political activity will ramp up dramatically. At stake is not only the presidency, but all the seats in both the Senate and the House of Representatives. Not all factions with representatives in the cabinet are happy with Vazquez's ultimatum; there is a fear among some that once their candidates have stepped down from a ministerial position, their diminished public profile may result in fewer votes.

¶4. Although none of the resignations below have been confirmed, the Embassy predicts that around 7 members of the 13-minister-strong cabinet (plus one de-facto minister) are expected to resign.

A speculative summary follows:

- Interior Minister Daisy Tourne, a member of the Socialist Party, will probably resign. Note: the Socialist Party backs presidential hopeful Danilo Astori, who currently polls in second place within the FA. End note. Although she has expressed a desire to remain with the Vazquez administration until the completion of his term, she has a sizeable number of detractors resulting from battles with

police unions, rising crime, and widely criticized prison decisions.

- Defense Minister Dr Jose Bayardi, from the 'Vertiente Artiguista,' faction, as well as Vice Minister Jorge Menendez, are likely to resign and seek parliamentary seats. Vertiente Artiguista supports presidential hopeful Marcos Carambula, currently in third place.

- Enrique Rubio, head of the Planning and Budget Office of the Presidency (a de-facto ministerial position) is also aligned with the Vertiente Artiguista faction. Rubio was once a potential presidential candidate himself and, like Bayardi, carries the kind of clout that could see him secure a seat in the Assembly in October.

- Transport and Public Works Minister Victor Rossi, a member of the 'Alianza Progresista,' has announced that he knows what his decision is, but that he will wait until July to announce it. Less coy political sources have suggested it is probable he will campaign for a parliamentary seat. Note: the Progressive Alliance supports Marcos Carambula.

- Industry, Energy and Mining Minister Daniel Martinez, a member of the Socialist Party, was once a potential presidential candidate himself. He retains a high profile in the party. The Socialists are hopeful he will make it to the Senate.

- Labor and Social Welfare Minister Eduardo Bonomi is a member of the Movimiento de Participacion Popular faction (The Popular Participation Movement or MPP), which is home to the present Presidential Candidate front-runner Jose Mujica. His clear aspirations for a Senate seat make his resignation probable.

- Agriculture, Livestock and Fish Minister Ernesto Agazzi is also a member of the MPP faction and is also seen as a possible parliamentary candidate. He has been a lightning rod for criticism by ranchers critical of his handling of the drought in late 2008 and early 2009.

- It seems possible that Tourism and Sports Minister Hector Lescano may also resign. He is presently playing his cards close to his chest, however, declaring that Vazquez's announcement will require some 'personal reflection' before he announces his decision in June. Lescano is a member of the Partido Demócrata Cristiano-Alianza Progresista (Progressive Democratic Christian Alliance Party) and is backing Astori.

- Economy and Finance Minister Alvaro Garcia, a Socialist, is likely to move back to the private sector after the election and will therefore not be required to resign. Garcia is very close to the foreign minister and president, and is considered key to maintaining economic equilibrium amidst worldwide economic turmoil.

- Foreign Affairs Minister Dr. Gonzalo Fernandez, a member of the Socialist Party but a criminal defense attorney by trade, is also thought to be returning to private practice after he relinquishes his ministry. He has stated that he will remain in office until the end of the Vazquez government.

- Education and Culture Minister Maria Simon, from the 'Leftist Independent Sector,' has made no statement about her intentions, including which candidate she plans to support. It is widely assumed that she will choose to stay in her Cabinet position.

- Social Development Minister Marina Arismendi of the Communist Party is much more definite; she has made it clear that she has no aspirations to a parliamentary seat and will not resign. Increased social spending, although criticized by the opposition, has been a hallmark of the Vazquez government.

- It also seems probable that Public Health Minister Maria Julia Munoz, a former member of the 'Vertiente Artiguista' faction and a close ally of the President, will opt to keep her place in the Cabinet. She may well return to private practice after the election.

- Housing, Land Use Planning and Environment Minister Carlos Colacce, also close to Vazquez, is likely to remain in the Cabinet.

He is a member of the Leftist Independent faction, but is considered to be more technocrat than political heavyweight. He plays a key role in developing Uruguay's plan of action on climate change, but has been criticized for not delivering on GOU promises for low-cost housing.

14. There is no word yet on possible replacements for the departing ministers, but it is likely many will be promoted from within their ministries. A key exception may be the interior minister, an important position that in Uruguay holds precedence over all other Cabinet slots. Vazquez seems to be aiming for a calm and steady close to this chapter of his political life. Public approval continues to be high. An opinion poll published this week not only shows a 53 percent approval for his administration's performance, but also places his personal popularity at 61 per cent, making him by far the most popular politician in Uruguay. Last year's cabinet reshuffle (Vazquez's first), in which some political allies were moved into ministerial positions, already signaled Vazquez's desire to consolidate his achievements and reputation.